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Part 2

Economic Life

131 The home of the Yamana /Yahgan/ is that vast maze of islands extending farthest into Antarctic waters like irregular fragments of land broken off from the solid bulk of the South American continent. It is
132 swept by raging storms. Foam-crested waves beat against its naked shores. The restless brine eats into its rocks. Heavy showers and dense snowstorms seldom permit the golden light of the sun to break through, and the entire landscape is wrapped in a weird gloom. The temperature of the air is kept low by the cold ocean current from the south. The large expanse of water favors abundant rainfall, and a disagreeable dampness soaks everything. Heavy frosts and extreme drops in temperature are, to be sure, almost entirely absent because of the moderating ocean, but the moisture-laden air and the dripping dampness everywhere have a more unfavorable effect on plants, land animals, and human beings than cold would have (p. 21 /untranslated/). Only a few hardy specimens of flora (p. 26 /untranslated/) and fauna (p. 33 /untranslated/) can flourish. For the human beings destined to live in this cheerless region, narrow limits have been set for their demands on life and for the development of material possessions.

181 Actually, the Yamana have not merely adapted themselves to the natural conditions of their homeland to the extent they were forced to do so; mastering their environment, they have created for themselves a dignified human existence of the most modest kind. Specifically, they have arranged their affairs so advantageously that, under the given conditions, another primitive people could scarcely improve anything essential. Creative intelligence and long experience have taught them to make their very meager external resources serve them. Their extremely limited material possessions relieve them of all cares with regard to daily necessities and permit them to enjoy life. Almost everything the Yamana calls his own is very functional. In his various arrangements he is far from having achieved the perfection and artistic accomplishments manifested by the peoples on the opposite side of the globe in the Arctic regions. The things that inhibit and impede him are almost completely beyond his influence.

2: Cooper E-4 (no date) 1946 SH6 Yahgan SH6

THE YAHGAN

By JOHN M. COOPER

INTRODUCTION

133 **Natural environment.**—The *Yahgan* habitat is archipelagic, the mountainous islands constituting the last outposts of the Andean chain before it dips beneath the sea at Cape Horn (map 1, *No. 1A;* map 2).[1A] Atmospheric temperatures at sea level differ somewhat from locality to locality, with a summer mean around 50° F., a winter mean close to the freezing point, and a winter minimum around 10° F. Snowfalls not infrequently occur even in the summer months (pl. 35). Relatively very cold or very warm spells are usually of short duration. Sudden changes in temperature, in wind velocity, and in sunshine, cloudiness, and precipitation are characteristic. Violent squalls and strong gales are common.

137 The islands up to about 1,500 feet altitude are heavily wooded, chiefly with beeches (*Nothofagus betuloides* and *N. pumilio*, evergreens; *N. antarctica*, deciduous), together with Winter's bark (*Drimys winteri*), "cypress" (*Libocedrus tetragona*), and leña dura (*Maytenus magellanica*). The forest floor is thickly covered with rotting and rotten fallen trunks, which with the thick spiny masses of barberry bushes (*Berberis ilicifolia* and *B. buxifolia*) and holly (*Pernettya mucronata*) make travel through the woods extremely 136 slow and difficult. Foxes and rats, the land mammals that could have helped in the *Yahgan* dietary, were eschewed. Marine mam- [262] mals, fish, and other sea food were abundant in most localities. As [361] a result of the foregoing conditions, the *Yahgan* lived mostly on the water and along the shore line, penetrating inland very little.

131 **Territory.**—In the last century and probably from much earlier times the *Yahgan* regularly occupied the southern coast of Tierra del Fuego Island from about the eastern end of Beagle Channel to Brecknock Peninsula, and the islands south of this line to Cape Horn. But they evidently wandered more widely; *Yahgan* house sites and implements have been found as far north as Elizabeth Island in the Strait of Magellan (Bird, 1938, p. 260). Between Good Success Bay and the eastern end of Beagle Channel, there was considerable

[1A] [These maps have not been processed; see source 1: Gusinde, category 116, end maps, for similar information--analyst]

3: Lothrop E-5 (1924-1925) 1928
SH6 Yahgan SH6

The Ona and the Haush spoke related dialects and occupied the interior of the main island of Tierra del Fuego; they are often called the Foot Indians because of their manner of living. The Yahgan frequented the south coast of the main island and the islands to the south; the Alacaluf formerly lived at the western end of the Straits of Magellan but have moved northward to Ración sound. The habitat of each tribe as it was half a century ago is shown in pl. IV.

No census of the indigenous population in the old days was ever taken, but from several different estimates the numbers of each tribe seventy-five years ago were approximately:

Ona, 3600	Yahgan, 2800–3000
Haush, 300	Alacaluf, 3500–4000

Since at least half of the Alacaluf lived north of the Straits of Magellan, the total native population of Tierra del Fuego and the adjacent islands can scarcely have been more than 9000.

At the time of the writer's visit (1924–25) the Indian population, including mixed-bloods, was approximately:

Ona, 60–70	Yahgan, 40–50
Haush, 2– 3	Alacaluf, 150

Of the Alacaluf only two were seen south of the Straits of Magellan, as they now live far to the north, for the greater part in the vicinity of Ración sound. The figure for their numbers is the estimate of the Rev. John Williams of Punta Arenas.

Later in the same year (1925) an epidemic of measles ravaged Tierra del Fuego. What happened to the Yahgan I do not know, but Mr. William Bridges wrote me that more than twenty adult Ona and an unknown number of children had died. With the exception of a few mixed-bloods the Indians of Tierra del Fuego are probably extinct.

Because the writer saw little of the Alacaluf and Haush, it is principally of the Ona and Yahgan we shall speak below. Before beginning a detailed description we shall discuss their environment and physical peculiarities, and shall list the features of their culture.

CLIMATE

Tierra del Fuego lies between 53° and 56° south latitude, corresponding to the position in the northern hemisphere of the Aleutian islands, southern Labrador, or the central part of Great Britain.

3: Lothrop E-5 (1924-1925) 1928
SH6 Yahgan SH6

132 The shores of Tierra del Fuego are washed by an Antarctic current which ranges in temperature during the year between 40° and 50° Fahrenheit. Hence the land temperature is low, but there are no great extremes.

Let us examine some figures. At Ushuaia, the southernmost town in the world, according to Argentine government reports the mean summer temperature is 50° Fahrenheit, while the winter mean is 25°. In summer the thermometer rarely registers above 65°, yet in winter the mercury seldom falls below 10°. At Punta Arenas on the Straits of Magellan the summer mean is 51° and the winter mean is 28°. Although I have no figures to support the assertion, I believe the eastern side of the island is colder than the western.

As to rainfall, at Ushuaia it amounts to 24.8 inches annually, while in Punta Arenas there are 16 inches, to which must be added 14 inches of snow. In the east rain is more frequent, and about 50 inches are said to fall on Staaten island annually. It is quite surprising that the comparatively light rainfall of Ushuaia and Punta Arenas should foster the growth of forests almost tropical in their density. The controlling factor probably is the feebleness of evaporation, owing to low average temperatures.

The figures cited for rainfall and temperature show that extremes are absent from Tierra del Fuego, yet they do not give a just picture of the climate as it affects human life. For instance, the writer witnessed snowfalls at sea-level in December, January, and February, the three summer months. Two of Captain Cook's men were actually frozen to death near Good Success bay on the night of January 16, 1769.[1] To be sure, Cook's men may be criticized with some justice for allowing night to overtake them in a strange land at a place where no firewood was nearby; yet the incident shows that even in the Fuegian summer one must prepare to face cold. In winter, snow piles deep in the wooded portions of the island, but on the open plains it often turns to sheet-ice.

In some years the frosts never leave the ground in Tierra del Fuego. Grains never ripen except occasionally in the vicinity of Porvenir on the north coast.

Owing to the ecliptic orbit and inclined axis of the earth, summer is eight days shorter and winter eight days longer in the southern than in the northern hemisphere. The upper photograph in pl. II

[1] See Hawkesworth, II, chap. IV.

3: Lothrop E-5 (1924-1925) 1928
SH6 Yahgan SH6

was taken at an elevation of 2020 feet on December 22. It shows midsummer snow-pockets above the tree-line at an elevation of only 1800 feet. At 3000 to 3500 feet one reaches fields of eternal snow from which numerous glaciers descend to the sea. Glaciers reach sea-level not only in Tierra del Fuego but for hundreds of miles northward on the west coast of Chile, as far in fact as the Gulf of Peñas, which corresponds in latitude to the position of Duluth, Seattle, Budapest, or Geneva. This is about 1250 miles nearer the equator than the most southerly coastal glacier in Norway.

In addition to cold, wind is an unfavorable factor on human life in Tierra del Fuego. Cape Horn gales are world famous; squalls are sudden and savage; even the prevailing westerly winds blow with enough vigor to make life in the open unpleasant. To the Foot Indians of the interior the winds were more disagreeable than dangerous, but to the Canoe Indians they were fraught with peril. Not only might treacherous williwaws sweep from the mountains to overwhelm their bark canoes, but prolonged gales might isolate them on barren islands for days or even weeks till they starved to death.

The picture we have painted of the Fuegian climate is a most unpleasant one. In the mind of the writer it is mitigated by the memory of warm summer days with motionless air and brightly shining sun. On such days sea-bathing is no more uncomfortable than on the coast of Maine or the English channel. However, one must pick a place where the incoming tide sweeps across sun-warmed sands.

The most unusual aspect of the Fuegian summer climate is the rapidity with which it changes. At one moment it will be a clear bright day with no wind, while half an hour later it may be blowing a gale and snowing. This summer climate—except for the rapid changes—is not unlike a New England October, blessed with "Indian summer" and not infrequent frosts. It is bracing and invigorating, however, and in Tierra del Fuego causes both men and animals, domestic or foreign, to grow robustly.

When the climate of Tierra del Fuego has been pictured, the most unfavorable aspect of the environment on human beings has been described, for the flora and fauna both supply many economic assets to the inhabitants.